

System Shock

by guitarbuilder93

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Summary: Commander Palmer often finds herself playing the "bad cop", and Captain Lasky has his own image to upkeep. But all too often, people aren't what they seem. This is my exploration into the dynamics of these characters, as well as others aboard the Infinity. Ratings and story flow subject to change. Currently T for language, alcohol, and graphic description. Post Spartan Ops.

1. Chapter 1: It's the Quiet Ones

****Author's Note: ****Hey everyone, I've taken a break from a little more ambitious project to write my first fan-fic. I enjoy the idea of a Lasky/Palmer dynamic, and I'll try to convey a good interpretation of the Halo universe through this story. I absolutely love the canon, but it also looks like there's enough wiggle room with these new characters for a guy to introduce some new elements. Rate, review, and do whatever else it is that us deviants here do :).

I claim nothing from the Halo universe for personal gain. All is owned and controlled by Microsoft and Bungie/343 Industries. I simply take up writing for the personal enjoyment.

"O Captain! My Captain!" is authored by Walt Whitman. Not sure what the disclaimers are there, but I claim nothing from it either.

* * *

><p>"Madsen! Hand me the tequila, this one looks like it's worth a try."<p>

"Madsen this, Madsen that. Always doing the heavy lifting. What are you going to do when I'm not around?" Madsen retorts with a grin as he passes Paul Demarco the bottle.

"Eh, probably just keep on trying to drink everyone under the table, maybe do some more _community outreach_. I think I'd do just fine on

my own."

"Tssssh, that hurts."

"There's some ice over here. You want one of these?" DeMarco points to the line-up of glasses already filled with mixtures of varying colors.

Finding this a suitable time, I decide to join in the banter. "Are you going to sample all of the recipes listed on that tumbler, Spartan?"

DeMarco comes back swinging, never disappointing. "Only the ones that look good. Which, right now, look likeâ€¦" He draws his finger around the tumbler, pulled close to his face in mock transfixion. "One, two, three, fourâ€¦ All of them!"

I can't help but chuckle and roll my eyes, before leaning into the barstool I'm braced against and giving him a slight squint. "I'd be careful then. Seems to me like all that booze would make your _community outreach_ a little less than 'up-to-snuff'."

Madsen and Hoya both pick up on the hint and immediately start breaking down in laughter. "Oh man, she cut low on that one DeMarco! You may want to just stick to fixing drinks!" Hoya suggests to the fireteam leader, grabbing his shoulder and giving it a healthy shake to make sure he knew that it was all for the sake of good spirits.

"I'll give you that one, Commander. But I'll be back. Don't you worry about that." Says DeMarco in between shaking the tumbler, already experimenting with another one of his concoctions.

"Mmm-hmm."

Noticing Tedra sneak up behind DeMarco, I have to try to suppress my smile when I see what she's after. Watching the bottle of tequila intently, she whisks it away as soon as DeMarco sets it back down onto the counter. From the looks of it, Thorne's going to show her how to do proper tequila shots, salt and limes included. There was only one ingredient missing, and now that was remedied as well.

"Ooop, where'sâ€¦ Hey! Grant! Damnitâ€¦" Sighing, DeMarco takes the tumbler in hand again, blindly placing a finger on a recipe. "Whiskey it is, then!" Low spirits were in short supply tonight.

I can't keep from grinning widely now, that was damn near perfect. Looking over at the table where she and Thorne are stationed, I notice eight double-shot glasses along with as many slices of lime and a healthy dose of salt, yet only the two of them. Vernier wasn't drinking tonight, and from the way he kept looking and everyone with slight unease, I took it that he doesn't spend much time at all around intoxicated Spartans. Thorne, however, catches me looking over at them. "Practice shots, Commander! She's got to have more than one chance to get the hang of it."

I laugh and shake my head. "So you settled on four?"

"Seemed like a good number."

I bring my hand up to my forehead in mock disbelief.

"Say, Commander. Where's the Captain? This whole thing was his idea, and now he's raining on his own parade!" Madsen pipes up, after sitting back and taking in the banter for a few minutes.

He brings up a good point, and I try to think of any paperwork that would have kept him tied up for this long. _It has to be a combination of the reports from Requiem and the shit he's no doubt gotten into over Dr. Halsey_. I surmise to myself. Before I can convey that thought to Madsen however, Hoya jumps in with an idea of his own.

"Somebody give him a call. He's at least gotta _see_ what he's missing." He suggests, pointing to the video terminal on the far bulkhead, across from the bar.

"If Lasky has to churn through mission reports, maybe we should justâ€¦" Gabriel starts up, but is quickly cut off by Madsen, already at the terminal and punching in the address to connect to Lasky's quarters.

"Oh no! No way, the Captain needs a sit-rep."

Standing back and apparently a little proud of his handiwork, Madsen allows the terminal to have a view of all of us who are crowded around the bar. The call beeps several times before Lasky answers it remotely. He's still in his slacks and his sidearm is still holstered at his side, but he has traded in his lightly armored coat for a black fitted t-shirt and is just finishing hanging it up.

"Lasky. Be there in a second."

"Captain!" The jumbled conglomerate of voices that greet him are friendly, but a little over the top in terms of volume. He turns around and paces over to his desk with a raised eyebrow and a grin. From what I can discern from his walk, he's relieved himself of his boots as well. Affording himself some creature comforts, but not all.

He sits down at his chair with an exhaled "ah". "What's everybody up to down there?"

"Starting the party without you, oh exultant filler-outer of mission reports!" Madsen attempts his best fanfare-esque voice, like a squire announcing the presence of a nobleman.

Lasky laughs and rubs his forehead, not quite sure what to think of his new monicker.

"Did you come up with that all on your own, Madsen?"

"Yes sir!"

"Oh my, I'm impressed. Keep that up and I'll have to make you my personal announcer."

Madsen returned the comment with a sloppy salute.

"Alright now, my turn to hog the vid-com." I push gently past Madsen, although I'm not worried in the slightest about knocking the marksman off-kilter. Spartan-IV, after all. Tom waits for me to edge closer, and gives me that warm closed-lipped smile. It's a subtle difference, but there's definitely an extra sense of depth to his expressions when we talk to one another now. A sign of something more than friendship.

I mirror him in his soft smile. "Well now, Tom. DeMarco's cracked open the whiskey, you can't hide from us for too much longer!"

"Damn. You're making this hard, Sarah." Tom glances over at what can only be his datapad. "Give me another fifteen minutes, I'll be there."

I give him that scrutinizing look that I'm all too good at.

He laughs. "I promise."

"I'll hold you to it!" I jab back at him. He gives me one more soft chuckle and a raise of his eyebrows before stretching and yawning.

"Lasky out."

Vernier looks as if he's had enough of our antics, and stands up from the table to leave the rec-room. "Calling it quits early, Doctor?" Thorne calls after him.

Vernier turns back for a moment, in the middle of a stretch. "It looks like I can't keep up with you guys. I'll just hit the sack."

"Have a good one, then."

Vernier just nods and exits the room. He has seemed a little more uptight when I've run into him over the last few days, even for an egghead. A little stranger still considering the downtime we've had. Nevertheless, the drinks and banter continue to flow throughout the room. I've drifted off into my own thoughts for a few minutes before I've realized it, spurred on by the short vid-com and doubtlessly assisted by the alcohol.

I think of what Tom and I have been through during the past few weeks. It's definitely safe to say that I was angrier than Hell at him for what happened between the two of us and Majestic over Dr. Halsey. Angry that he had stood up against me, and bested me. I always hated when that happened. But I was even more—_confused_ that he had stood against arguably the most powerful person in the UNSC. Admiral Serin Osman would most certainly _not_ _let_ this go.

There was plenty of yelling from my side, but only a steady, raised voice from him. I suppose that argument could have been compared to a wildfire pitted against an earthquake. Sure, the wildfire comes out hot, swift and swinging for the fences, but every fire runs out of fuel at one point. The earthquake however, is a different matter entirely. There's no stopping it. Tom would wait until there was a

lull in the argument, and come back on such solid ground that even I couldn't find it in myself to rebuke. He had taken every verbal bullet I fired at him, and then disassembled the gun. He took away the façade of Commander Palmer and left me standing there with only Sarah.

Nothing was black and white to him; it was always some mottled hue of gray that always complicated things. He had explained that even though he knew how fucked up this view of the universe made some situations, he always felt it was the right view. Always right, but not often easy. We had a calmer talk up in the loftiest area of Infinity's Spartan-IV armor bay a week later, overlooking the entire complex, where I had first addressed the IV's en masse prior to the second battle of Requiem. I had asked him how he could deal with that weight he had imposed upon himself.

"_It's a drag a lot of the time. Sometimes it almost holds me to the point of inaction, and that's when things can get dangerous. But I still trust my gut, it's made me and now I see that there's not a chance in hell I'm letting it go."_

"_You ever think you'll get lost in between making the right choice and completing the objective?"_

"_A lot of the time, yeah. But I can say that I've always had a few anchors that make sure I stay grounded when I feel like I'm starting to drift."_

"_Anchors because of people? Not what you believe?"_

"_Mhmm. Cadmon was the first. Chyler was pretty quick to take his place when heâ€| wellâ€|"_

I edged a little closer and leaned on the railing, mimicking his posture. "Yeah."

"_I've still got one more, though. I wonder if they know how important they really are." He was rubbing his thumb over the smooth purple shard that shares the same chain as the two sets of dog tags cradled protectively in his palm._

Not wanting to make assumptions, yet still fairly certain of where this was headed, I asked. "I'm not very good at cryptic, Tom. I can connect dots, but cryptic? Not for me."

He looked over at me with that warm grin of his, before gazing back out over the armor bay. This was the first time he had let that added bit of warmth come to the surface, and it made me curious. A little less Commander Palmer trying to find good, strong words to console a friend and a little more Sarah letting her heart do the thinking.

"_She'sâ€| fast and determined like a fire. But then she's steadfast like a compass; always has her head and heart pointed loyally in a constant direction. And holy shit, can she can bear down like a tempest. 'Hell hath no fury', let me tell you! But she'll stick it out to the very end. I've seen that every time."_

"_She sounds like a hell of a pain."_

"_People can call her all kinds of things." He looked to me again with that same smile. _

"_I just call her Sarah."_

And there I was, just Sarah. Whatever was left of the shell of Commander Palmer that day had been smashed to bits. I had to have known that it was coming, but I couldn't stop myself from blushing like a little girl. I didn't know I could spontaneously create butterflies in my stomach, but they were there in full force.

"_Tom, Iâ€¦ damn."_

"_Didn't know I had that in me. Maybe I should write a book?" We both laughed like kids at the thought._

"_Now Captain, let's not go that far."_

I paused for just a second, then leaned over and gave him a kiss on his left cheek. Always right, but not often easy. It had just taken me a while to see some things that way. Then it was his turn to blush, a lighter red as opposed to my fire-engine-esque shade. "Ah hell."

Looking at each other now with equal thoughts running through our heads, we slowly allowed our lips to say physically what they never could have verbally. Patiently they explored one another, sometimes stepping back as if to admire their work before approaching for more. I was his anchor, as he was mine.

Breaking out of my own head and looking over at the clock, only twelve minutes had passed since Tom had promised he'd show. It had seemed like so much longer. Not that I had any objections, considering what I was lost in thought over. I now wanted nothing more than for him to come strolling through the door.

A soft but concussive "bang", barely noticeable through the bulkheads of Infinity, emanates from directly above the bar. Our heightened hearing however, causes us all to pause and look up, then around to each other.

"Sounded likeâ€¦" Hoya begins, before the half-sized datapad in my rear pocket chirps loudly. My blood turns to ice and a hand clenches my heart in a death-grip as I answer. Everyone in the room watches my face in confused half-drunken shock as the color no doubt recedes from it.

"Sarahâ€¦ I've got a little problem up here. I'm gonna need some help." Tom's breathing was labored and ragged.

Even counting the times encased in my armor, I don't think I have ever moved that quickly in my life. Sprinting out the rec-room door, Majestic is close on my six like hellhounds as we cram into the nearest elevator. As quickly as the elevators move with six augmented humans aboard, the journey up two decks was painfully slow to me and I wished for anything to speed it up.

Upon rounding the corner and finding Tom's sliding door wide open, the invisible hand gripping my heart only squeezes tighter. Dr.

Vernier is lying in a pool of his own fluids, a .50 caliber wound entering square between his eyes and exiting the crown of his head. The round is embedded in the ceiling above, along withâ€¦ other bits. The weapon meant to terminate Tom lies midway between the two men, a ten inch combat blade. The compound ground steel implement is now stained crimson clear to the hilt. And Tomâ€¦ Jesus Christ, Tom.

He's managed to push himself back to his desk, propping himself against it and leaving an incredible amount of blood in his wake. Dr. Vernier had thrust the knife upwards, just under the ribcage and through Tom's liver and lung. I rush up to him, completely distraught. All of my training, all of my field experience has damn near gone out the window. I do the only thing that might be remotely worth a shit and apply pressure however I can. Trying not to crush his ribs from being unaware of my own strength, I'm failing helplessly to stop the bleeding.

I frantically whip around and attempt to resemble Commander Palmer once more. "Grant! Get me biofoam! Gauze, bandages, anything! Hoya, shut that door! DeMarco and Madsen, get that motherfucker's corpse out of my sight!"

Tom gives me the lightest punch in the shoulder I have ever felt him deliver. Still, It's such an endearing measure of strength that it makes my tears flow twofold. "Pressure, Sarah. You can push harderâ€¦ it's alright. Vernier told meâ€¦ to say that Osman sends her regards. Told me I wouldn't be fucking upâ€¦ anymore orders now."

_That traitorous, double-crossing bitch. ONI had better topple under her rule, I swear to High Heaven. You've killed a damn saint, you happy Osman?! _I scream in my head. But my voice registers as only a whisper. "We'll get them back, Tom. You'll patch up and testify at a trial. Always were a fan of that."

"Won half the battleâ€¦ already. Son of a bitch wasâ€¦ sloppy. Got bloodthirsty and wanted to drag it out." Tom makes a firing motion with his hands and smiles, teeth stained from the blood.

Grant came charging back within twenty seconds with all three things I've ordered. Tom lets out a muffled grunt, and then a sigh as the biofoam sets in, burning as it cleans away the wound. But something is still terribly wrong; his skin is losing all color at a quickening pace.

"Internal bleeding not stopping. Jesus, I don't know what we're going to do about the liver." Grant spews out nervously, shaken up as well. The four men of team Majestic stand in disbelief at the sight of Tom reduced toâ€¦ this. There's no room for them around him, they would simply be a crowd. Tom senses what we all know and what I so desperately don't want to believe, and yanks his dog tags from his neck. He gently pushes them against my chest and I close my hands around his, all the while shaking my head frantically. They might as well be made of ice.

"No no no no no. Don't do this. You're Captain Thomas Lasky, you can't be struck down, you wouldn't be struck down. Never like this."

His voice is at a whisper now as well, but the ragged gaps in his

speech have stopped. "I remember something along the lines of 'It's the quiet ones you want to watch out for'. 'O Captain! My Captain!' Seems pretty damn fitting, hmm?"

His attempts at humor only force more salt into the wound. "Fuck. We've been a team. We were supposed to do this together, to do this all together. You're _Tom_. You're _my Tom_. What the hell happens now?"

He takes his left hand off my chest and places it on my cheek. What looks like an incredibly painful gesture with his wound on that side, but shock has to have set in by now. "Hey, hey now. I'll be around, that's what these are for. That's the cruel beauty of life isn't it? You just never know."

I can't hold back this lake of emotions any longer; the dam is splitting right down the middle. I bend low against him, careful to avoid triggering any more pain. The tiniest pinhole opens in that dam, and everything that is pent up, that has been pent up, funnels down and out into three words that I haven't strung together for anyone in a long time.

"I love you."

I always have. I was just too busy being Commander fucking Palmer to be Sarah. I never even gave her a shot. Not enough time, never enough time.

"Ah, don't do that to me now Sarah." Tom lets out a horrendous combination of a chuckle and a wet, blood soaked cough.

"But I love you too. Have for a while now."

The guilt comes in like a wave, smashing against my wall of resolve that's entirely too short. _You never know what you have until it's gone._ I kiss him on the forehead, and he flashes me _our _smile one last time, before placing his head against my chest.

"I still owe you guys those drinks, you know. Don't think I've forgotten."

"Never." I reply in a broken voice.

"Maybe another talk sometimeâ€¦| tooâ€¦|"

And with that, Tom releases his final breath. I move my fingers down over his eyes, closing them as if in some sick imitation of a peaceful rest, and cradle his upper torso in my arms. But my eyes are clenched tightly shut; I can't bear to look at him. Tedra stands up, tears welling in her own eyes, and she steps back to slam her fist into the bulkhead. Gabriel approaches us and crouches down, placing his hand on Tom's limp shoulder. I can smell the tequila still on his breath, but the only thing that odor makes me want to do now is vomit. He finishes the poem Tom had thought of. I let him continue out of silent respect.

_O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done;
>The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;

The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,

>While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and
daring;

But O heart! heart! heart!

O the bleeding drops of red,

Where on the deck my Captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.

_O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;

>Rise upâ€"for you the flag is flungâ€"for you the bugle
trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreathsâ€"for you the shores
a-crowding;

>For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces
turning;

O captain! dear father!

This arm beneath your head;

It is some dream that on the deck,

You've fallen cold and dead.

_My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;

>My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The
ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done;
>From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object
won;

Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!

But I, with mournful tread,

Walk the deck my captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.

Commander Sarah Palmer stirred for the last time in a hellish,
restless sleep. She jolted awake, glancing around frantically. "Tom?"
She darts out of her bunk, the sheets already a strewn out mess from
her kicking and grabs the datapad from her desk. Bringing up crew
vitals, as many commanding officers are allowed to access, she flew
through the last names on the roster until reaching the section
containing those that start in L.

_Ready room. He's in the ready room and he's fine. Heart rate. Blood
pressure. All fine. He's up really late, but he's all there, Sarah.
It was a dream, just a really shitty dream._

But it had seemed so real, almost tangible. She remembered being able
to smell the alcohol, to feel the lull of the ship during its lazy
hours.

_I remember the smell of his blood, too. The feeling of his ice-cold
skin._

_STOP IT. Get a lid on it, right now. You're going to be a mess if

you don't._

Sarah drew in several deep breaths, the shakiness in her movements decreasing each time. She rolled her head around, loosened up her limbs one at a time, and rubbed her eyes. As she did, she also remembered that only most of her dream had been fantasy. Lasky and Palmer had indeed shared a conversation on the observation deck of the armor bay. But it had ended by her account when Tom had explained what he saw in her. There had been no flirting, and no kiss. Sarah had enjoyed the idea of what could be, but it had all been in her head, private and free from the scrutiny of others. Reality was an entirely different animal. She couldn't bear to stay by his side after that, the tidal wave of what she was feeling was insurmountable.

Imagine that, Commander Palmer doesn't have the guts to face her feelings. Maybe Sarah would, but you never gave that part of yourself a chance.

She thought that maybe the whole dream held a message for her. Palmer may have been a grunt at one point, but she certainly wasn't unintelligent. Could this be the consequence of the denial of her feelings? Or the acceptance of them? If either possibility was the truth, the thought of the outcome gutted her regardless. The two of them kept speaking, as their parting ways in the armor bay hadn't been unfriendly. Conversation was simply more reserved now. She resolved to come to terms with how she felt, in due time. She would definitely need more of that.

Maybe a late night walk. It'll get your blood moving, and maybe your thoughts will follow.

She would definitely need time.

* * *

><p>Note: This ain't over yet!

2. Chapter 2: Down Time

****Author's Note:**** I hadn't planned on it being ten days between chapters, but dead week is upon me -- This chapter is slower, but I have plans for this story. I have many, many plans!

* * *

><p>I gazed out over the armor bay, my thumb running gently over the smooth side of the weathered shard of hunter armor. A token to me from the Chief a little over thirty years ago, it sat over the two sets of dog tags in my palm, the final protector of Cadmon and Chyler's last remembrance.

_ 'Wish you guys could see me now. But she does, and I've still got her around.' I reminisced as I glanced over at Sarah. She was mirroring my own stance, leaning onto the rail of the observation deck with her elbows propped._

_ "I've still got one more though. I wonder if they know how important they really are." I gave her a warm, closed smile that I

hoped would do a better job of showing her what I meant than my words could. She cocked her head slightly and it almost seemed like her eyes softened a bit. Maybe curiosity? I've seen her let it get the best of her on occasion._

_ "I'm not very good at cryptic, Tom. I can connect dots, but cryptic? Not for me."_

_ "She'sâ€ fast and determined like a fire. But then she's steadfast like a compass; always has her head and heart pointed loyally in a constant direction. And holy shit, can she can bear down like a tempest. 'Hell hath no fury', let me tell you! But she'll stick it out to the very end. I've seen that every time."_

"_She sounds like a hell of a pain."_

"_People can call her all kinds of things."I smiled at her again. I just couldn't help it._

"_I just call her Sarah."_

She had known exactly what I meant, but her reaction was about as confusing as it was endearing. She jolted in just the slightest of ways, and her face quickly turned a fire-engine red. It looked like she was torn between a girlish smile and a confused twitch of her mouth. She displayed both, as if there were two halves of her fighting for control. She only glanced back over to me twice, finding it hard to make eye contact again. But when she did, her brown eyes were wide and soft, and it almost looked like they were begging to pair up with that girlish smile.

"_Tom, Iâ€ damnâ€ I've gotta go. I don't knowâ€"_

And as quickly as Sarah had been reduced to failing to string two words together, she had found the three that I was hoping she wouldn't. She pushed shakily off the railing, something I had never seen from her before. As the elevator doors slid open, she turned to me and spoke in a gentle voice that I realized I hadn't heard often enough.

"_I'm sorry, Tom. I justâ€ I'm sorry."_

She stepped in to the lift and allowed the doors to close before she could hear me reply, in an equally gentle voice.

"_It's alright."_

Thomas Lasky reflected on the conversation he had shared with the Spartan Commander two weeks ago as he gazed out the viewpane of his ready room, his hands braced on the sill and his forehead resting against the glass. Tom told himself that he could understand if she felt that the whole conversation had been on the fast track, considering how long they had known one another without ever bringing their feelings into a full-fledged topic. Hell, they had been in limbo for six months before returning to Requiem.

Why wasn't anything said then? Why now?

But Lasky supposed that he would have been asking those same questions months ago, had their feelings been brought up then. The

time or place wasn't important, the doubts and the questions would always come. He just couldn't contain some of these thoughts anymore, and he had no idea why.

There had been undertones of something beyond friendship from the both of them for years, and Sarah's Spartan augmentation hadn't deterred them in the slightest. And Tom's confession hadn't exactly been earth-shattering. He had been concise about the things he saw in her that made him feel for her.

Sometimes however, all things need is a little push. He knew he had seen something try to fight its way to the surface in her. But she had left before it had a chance.

Why?

The captain had no answer to that question, and so he decided to let it linger at the back of his mind for the time being. He glanced at the clock upon returning to the ready room's table. It would have been 0300 on a twenty-four hour schedule, but Tom was past the intrusion of the constant thought of sleep. Weary, but still with an air of determination, Tom retook the seat facing his portable computer.

Damn paperwork has to get done at some time.

"Roland, where'd I leave off?" The AI's World-War era aviator likeness appeared on the pedestal. "It looks like you still have sixteen mission reports to audit from the remaining Spartan Fireteam leaders, all ten of the dossiers to close on Fireteams Castle and Mountain, andâ€¦ Oh myâ€¦"

Roland put on his best interpretation of a grimace.

"Nine hundred and ninety six requisition orders need your approval, and there are several dozen angry messages from various scientific staff on Earth demanding to know why _we_ let Requiem collide with a star. That now no longer exists."

"Always saving the best for last, aren't we? What part of 'read the report' is hard for these people to understand? Covenant Remnant. Leader is insane. End of story." Lasky ran a hand through his hair several times. "If you could organize those requisition orders by category, it would be much appreciated."

"Will do, Captain."

"Thank you, Roland." Tom knew that before he was even able to voice his reply, Roland would have the orders broken down by category, manufacturer, and color option. The ease of approving these things in bulk was never taken for granted by Lasky. Closing the files on the two Fireteams however, would not be pleasant. All ten Spartans killed in action, but there were no remains to recover. There were letters of condolence to write to next-of-kin from both him and Palmer, and replacements would need to be dealt with soon. These men and women were not Spartan II's, many still made frequent contact with family members. Tom would have the hardest time writing the letters to those who had been a sibling of one of the fallen super-soldiers. He decided to work through the requisition orders first.

"Captain?" Roland had remained on his pedestal, and shifted his weight from foot to foot. Lasky glanced up from his screen to acknowledge the avatar, and then buried himself once more in the purchase requests, auditing hundreds of the essential ones in bulk.

"Go ahead, Roland."

"Are thingsâ€| alright between you and the Commander?"

Lasky's attention belonged to the A.I.'s avatar now, and he was curious as to why a program would ask such a question if it was non-critical.

"They are, as far as I know. Have you noticed anything?"

"Well, sort of. I suppose. I have picked up on the significant drop of non-essential conversation between the two of you over the past week. Fluctuating body language, different speech patterns, changes in heart rate, the works. It all seemsâ€| strange."

You have completely noticed, liar. Lasky let the corner of his mouth curl up at the idea of Roland developing a sense of lying.

"That obvious? Maybe I need to work on my poker face."

"Could use some work, sir. But I always maintain tabs on the crew's states, and yours and Spartan Palmer's appear to be changing. Is there anything that I need to make a note of?"

"Would that be a question or a statement, Roland?"

The avatar shrugged his shoulders and gave Lasky a grin. "Whichever warrants a response."

That was definitely a statement. Lasky reclined in his chair, exhaled through inflated cheeks and ran his hand through his hair again. "I let Sarah know how much I see in her. She's stubborn as hell and we've got our tense spots, but she's always there. I didn't think anyone would stick around me for this long. We're always making sure we pull each other's asses out of the fire. I guess I just wanted to see if it would go any further."

"It seems like that would be a lot digest. I mean, not that I would know. Justâ€| from what I've heard."

"I was hasty. Six months of waiting before we came back to Requiem, and I decided to let that loose out of the blue. She has a hard time with this sort of thing, I should have seen that."

"You could put it another way. The Infinity was waiting for six months, battle-prepped and ready to strike. Everyone was on edge. But now, we're in limbo again. You wouldn't have had any idea how that conversation would have affected the mindset of either one of you. It might have even been a distraction. If I were to pretend I knew what I was talking about, I would say that you did well by holding back."

_When did Roland become insightful? I could have used a coach a few

days ago._

"Iâ€| guess I should have considered that. This down time is eating away at us just as much as combat prep. Hell, look at me now, I've picked up a damn _hobby._"

Lasky motioned to the far end of the table, where several M6 sidearms lay disassembled. One of which was the captain's current personal weapon, in the middle of a routine cleaning.

Just remember, the one time you don't clean your sidearm is the day before it jams in a firefight. Sure, sometimes you'll pick up any weapon you can get your hands on. But always be sure that your backup is firing on all cylinders. Tom could still hear Cadmon's advice like it had been given to him ten minutes ago.

Lasky had plans for the other two M6's, however. Both had received extended barrels, new composite slider, and upwardly-venting muzzle brakes. In theory, the new brakes should all but eliminate the climb the magnums suffered from while discharging. One was even fitted with a fifteen round extended magazine and a new firing mechanism, allowing for five three-round bursts from each clip. The three weeks since the emergency jump from Requiem had left Tom's hands somewhat idler, and he couldn't stand boredom. Exercising his purchase orders and getting his hands dirty had seemed like a good, honest waste of time. Much more so than sifting through his usual pile of digital paperwork.

"They're coming along nicely, Captain. Maybe have the Spartans run them through a trial-by-fire? Once they're finally done, of course." Roland made sure to add a little something to that last comment, as if to say _Hey! Look at how slow you work_.

"Oh, you're on your 'A' game this morning, Roland."

"Only the best for Captain Lasky and his crew!" The avatar threw in a sarcastic salute. Roland then became distracted for a moment, processing something. "Hmmm. That'sâ€| odd."

"What is it?"

The A.I. looked over at the captain like a child who had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Oh, it's nothing. No need to worry."

"Roland, you can't go from saying something is _odd _to trying to dismiss it completely. You wouldn't have said it if you didn't want me to hear."

"It'sâ€| uhmâ€| "

"_Roland._"

"It's the Commander, she's up and about."

Tom leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table, rubbing his hands. "It's been a few weeks since she's been up this late. Is that it?"

"Heart rate is slightly elevated, but lower than it was. Her brain

activity is erratic, and she looks anxious. Whatever woke her up couldn't have been pleasant. And itâ€¦ sounded like she murmured your name."

Lasky rubbed his hands together in a more nervous fashion now.

She usually sleeps like a rock when we have downtime. Is she alright? And she mentioned me? To hell with it if Roland's going to be my middle man.

He stood up from his computer and began to head for the ready room door. Roland gave him a quizzical look. "Sir?"

"Well, I've got to see how she is, of course." Lasky keyed in the code to open the door, but he turned back for a moment before he left. "Thanks for letting me know, Roland."

"Just doing my job, captain." Roland's avatar vanished from its resting place.

Tom didn't have to look long for Sarah. He had rounded the corner of the entrance to his ready room and found her down the hallway, patiently gazing out of the observation viewpane. He wondered if she had been there a while, trying to listen in on him and Roland. Sarah's augmented hearing was incredible. Walking closer, Lasky could see that she was controlling her breathing and fidgeting slightly with her hands. However, Palmer let the tension in her shoulders subside when Tom began to approach her. All three were signs that he made note of, and he prayed that he wouldn't give away that he already knew why she was awake.

"Sarah? You're up pretty early."

"I could tell you the same thing, captain. What are you still doing awake?"

Tom took up a spot next to her, still keeping a few feet between them. The commander wasn't sure if she was thankful for that space or not. "Whittling away at the pile of papers we've accumulated. Those condolences still have to be written." Lasky pinched the bridge of his nose.

"That they do. I've done the first few for Castle, and they're not getting any easier."

"I don't suppose so." The captain looked over at Sarah. "Are you doing okay?"

"Me? Yeahâ€¦ yeah, I'm alright." The words rang hollow. She returned him a quick glance, but focused her eyes back on Sigma Octanus IV, a pale sphere three million kilometers out. Tom immediately declared bullshit, it was the most pathetic excuse of reassurance he had heard from her in a while.

"_Sarah_." He was quickly perfecting that tone.

"It was just a bad dream. I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep, decided to come up here for a walk. That's all."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Palmer's reply came a little too quickly, and she recognized it instantly.

I never want to think about that again.

She allowed herself the slightest smile, not wanting to push him away with such a curt response. "But thank you, Tom."

Lasky gave her a small curl of his mouth and a nod, a gesture of understanding. He joined her in the view of the recuperating colony world, the nearest stable UNSC location to the exit of the Infinity's emergency slipspace jump away from Requiem's sun. There was no need to make a trip to the planet to re-supply, and the Infinity would be on the move soon, but the relief of returning to friendly-controlled space permeated through the ship. It was something not felt by either of them for weeks, and even though boredom was beginning to settle in around the captain, he would try to squeeze as much relief out of the situation as he could.

A thought crossed Lasky's mind as he remembered that Sarah hadn't seen the fruits of his new fascination with firearms. "I've got something to show you. Ready to take a break from the view?"

Sarah cocked her head again and raised an eyebrow, but motioned for him to lead the way. The ready room door slid back, and upon seeing the two re-vamped pistols disassembled on the table, the commander couldn't help but grin mischievously. "Wow Tom, I think the only standard issue part of those M6's I see is the grip."

"You like them? I had a couple ideas floating around, and my credit chip needed a little workout."

She chuckled. _Tinker Tom, I like this side of you._

"Alright then captain, give me a run-down."

Tom picked up the nearer of the two, turning both pieces over in his hands. "I started with a standard M6H, and swapped for an extended barrel. But that got me thinking about the kickback, so I had the boys down in machining come up with a muzzle brake that would fit. It's vented up and back to help with the kick and the muzzle climb. And thisâ€¦" He hefted the new slide. "â€¦ Is the thing I'm more excited about. It's a Teflon-impregnated polymer that should prevent slide jams all-together. Still holds eight rounds." Lasky returned the slide to its place on the main assembly, and handed the now mostly complete pistol to Sarah. The grip cushion was still missing along with several essential screws, but it was whole enough for her to get a decent feel of the weapon. She noted how well it balanced even with the extended barrel, and once the magazine was inserted, it would be ideal.

But Palmer's attention soon shifted to the other modified sidearm on the table. she noticed that the firing mechanism was bulkier than that of the one in her hands. "What's the story with this other one?"

Tom let out a low chuckle, akin to a mad scientist unveiling his masterpiece. "So, this one still has the new slide, barrel, and muzzle brake. But it's had its firing chamber re-done, so not only

can it hold its own with the one you've got, butâ€¦" He ran his fingers over the weapon and triggered a small lever. "â€¦ Three round burst firing, paired with a fifteen round magazine. This one is set up to fire M225 rounds, like the M6D."

"Jesus, getting a little impatient in firefights are we?"

Lasky returned her jab with a smile. "Maybe just a little. I owe the guys in machining." He paused. "Do you want to give it a try in the next match?"

Sarah traded the two weapons, mated the rapid-fire variant's slide to its body, and gave it a thorough once-over. She gave Tom that mischief-filled grin again. "Hell yes. Consider it now known as the M6LS."

"LS?"

"The Lasky Special."

Tom let out a full-blown laugh now, something Sarah found surprisingly calming. She made a point to let the sound sink in and sooth her nerves. "Wow. I'll finish it up and send it down to have it prepped for War Games. Should be waiting for your next match."

Palmer returned his smile with a slight one of her own, and placed the newly christened M6LS back on the ready room table. "That needs to be in the next day or two. Everyone on S-deck is getting anxious now that we're stuck waiting on orders." Now it was her turn to pause before continuing on. "What do you think about putting on a tournament in the War Games? Winner would getâ€¦ a little extra shore leave?" She seemed to ponder her own suggestion at the same time Tom did.

"That may be a needed distraction. Just make sure you don't get the sharks whipped up into too big of a feeding frenzy, commander. I've still got to keep a lid on this place!"

Ah, jesting now, are we Tom?

"Now captain, what kind of commander would I be if I couldn't keep these boys and girls in line?"

Tom returned her smirk. "Not much of one, I would imagine. But you do just fine." He had finally allowed a yawn to catch up to him, after twenty hours. "I suppose I wouldn't be much of a captain tomorrow if I didn't allow myself a nap. Two hours is better than nothing."

"That it is."

"Are you going to try to get back to sleep now? You know as well as anyone how quickly 0500 comes around."

"No, you know me. Once I'm up, I'm up." Not entirely true, but Sarah wasn't ready to risk the possibility of the dream repeating itself.

Lasky yawned again. "True enough. See you in a while, Sarah." But

before exiting his ready room, Tom turned back to the Spartan commander with a small expression of concern returning to his face. "You going to be alright up here?"

Palmer's eyes had gravitated back to the view of Sigma Octanus IV, now from the ready room's viewpane. But when they turned back to him, there was a measure of relief in them. She wasn't sure if Tom had seen it, but the satisfaction she felt couldn't be found in a conversation, no matter how light-hearted. It was something gained only in the company of someone who truly understood your nature, and whose nature was truly understood by you in return.

"I'll be alright. Goodnight Tom." Now the words were strong and confident.

Lasky smiled and allowed the door to slide closed behind him, leaving Sarah with her thoughts once more. This time however, they would be familiar.

You can't know, Tom. Not yet. But you damn sure know how to make a girl feel better, even if you aren't trying.

* * *

><p>Note: Up next; War games, conspiracies, and Covenant, oh my!

End
file.